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Morale in nursing students

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Morale in nursing students: a priority for nurse retention

For the first time in recent years, the number of nurses and midwives in the UK leaving the Nursing and Midwifery Council register has exceeded those joining. Fort-five per cent more registrants left than joined between 2016 - 2017, the majority of whom were aged under 40 (NMC, 2017). It is not surprising that pay and working conditions topped the reasons for leaving, but while these issues have an important role in addressing retention, they form only part of the picture. The roots of nurse retention lie within the experiences of student nurses, and to address this we must act much sooner.

Student nurses work hard; arguably harder than peers who have chosen different career paths. Balancing theory and practice with shift work and financial pressures is challenging. For younger students this comes during the transition to adulthood, while older students may have to balance studies with family commitments. No two student nurses are the same; each are individuals with different backgrounds and characteristics, thus creating programmes which support morale across the spectrum is a strategic challenge, but an important one nonetheless. Nurse educators have a duty to ensure nurse training inspires and enthuses. If it doesn't, students are less likely to stay the course, nor develop into the nurses we would wish to care for us.

It is a joy to interview candidates for nursing. The desire to make a difference is both heart-warming and uplifting, the sense of enthusiasm palpable. I read eloquent and powerful personal statements articulating reasons for applying. Often the motivation is a personal

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Accepted Article

experience of nursing care which proved inspirational. Nursing is exalted as an opportunity to transform lives. There is a sincerity and idealism, and this is a strength. This is exactly what student nurses should feel and be. Sadly, my impressions of student nurses once matriculated are often different. Enthusiasm replaced by a world-weariness and cynicism, curiosity and eagerness to learn withering well before graduation.

This is not always the case. The accomplishments and brilliance of many student nurses continue to impress and amaze. The compassion and empathy I witness in practice reassures me that we continue to educate nurses we can be proud of. But these are not enough. The future of nursing lies with our students and we have a duty to support all to achieve their full potential.

In my last placement as a third-year nursing student on a busy medical ward, my mentor (a senior nurse with over 20 years' experience) started each handover with a threat to quit. My memory of that placement is of burnt out nurses limping through each shift. It made me question my own path in nursing and my career plans. I have never worked on a medical ward.

Morale is contagious and as educators of nurses, we need to better understand the underpinning factors if we are to boost it. Experiences during nurse education have the power to colour perspectives for a lifetime; it is our duty to ensure they are the right ones so that the skills and experiences of valued nurses are not wasted. Of course, there are additional factors to consider. The NHS bursary reform and the introduction of tuition fees places increased financial burden on students, and for the general population, common mental health issues are thought to be at an all-time high (NHS, 2017) all of which may impact on the experience of nurse education. Understanding the morale of nursing students must be a priority.

Research exploring these issues in greater detail is therefore warranted.

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